Conditions (The) leading to success at examinations

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THE CONDITIONS LEADING TO SUCCESS AT EXAMINATIONS AND IN AFTER-LIFE.

A GOOD WORD FOR THE EXAMINERS.

It is impossible to deny that the tendencies that make for "cram" have vastly increased of late years. The recent researches, mainly of the younger school of scientists, have overloaded up-to-date text-books ar tures with new facts, or supposed facts, and have so extended the various branches and departments of medical knowledge, that these are now little more than in name wh they formerly were. The strain on teacher and student alike has thus enormously in eased; and both teacher and student alike now seek relief by all available means.

It is not surprising, then, that many men should now say that they *must* "cram" in order to get up their work for the examinations.

Mr. Cooke's contention is that "cram," even under present pressure, is yet, in every sense, a mistake.

The "crammer" can but learn to quickly forget again. And the oftener he learns and forgets again, and learns and forgets again, the more does the subject of his study lose for him all its earlier and natural attractions. The more he traces and retraces the old abstract grooves in which he has worked so long, the more he tires of them. The more he harps, and harps again, on the old chords on which he has been harping so long, the more he gets to hate their monotony. The further he advances, and the wider the ground he seems to cover in the short spurts which alone he can now tolerate, the sooner everything recedes from him; and the more he sickens of the effort, and comes to loathe it.

It is submitted, then, that a man who gets at all fully into the trammels of "cram" is *lost*, not only in regard to practical professional purposes, but even in regard to the mere passing his examinations: The more one has "crammed," the more one must "cram" (unless one changes one's methods altogether); but one "crams" to daily less and less purpose, and finally with, so to speak, vanishing results.*

* "Cram" is of seductive promise, but soon betrays its devotee. The artificial means entice by the apparent ease they *seem* to afford of covering a large amount of ground in a short space of time, and with little visible effort. But the roseate illusions soon disappear. What is learnt by "cram" is so evanescent that the ostensibly pleasant game does not pay. Things at all lengthy or complicated are forgotten almost before the end of the subject is reached. The system is a delusion and a snare. "Only failure after failure greet useless and demoralising efforts to achieve painfully and by 'cramming' what can only be done, – but can be done with incomparable benefit, and the healthiest of mental enjoyments, – with just a little honest practical work."—(PLEA FOR PRACTICAL WORK IN ANATOMY.)

What, then, remains for the confirmed "crammer" but to give up in despair, as more and more men are doing every year.*

The author would press all who have failed after following the methods of "cram" to simply set to do a little honest practical work. He would assure them, on the strength of long years of experience, that the effort required to learn things by seeing and handling them is AS NOTHING, as compared to learning any considerable amount by artificial means.

Tips do not help in reality.

This may at first seem contradictory. Why is it that tips are so ingeniously invented and so carefully handed down, if they do not help men?

They mislead. It is clear that it is easy to commit to memory, say, the structures behind the internal malleolus by means of the well-known tip, "Timothy doth vex, &c.;" and that it is equally easy to similarly learn, in a sense, and perhaps to remember for a time, the branches of the internal maxillary artery, or the articulations of the carpus and tarsus, and so forth.

But what it is desired to point out – let alone the morality or otherwise of "cramming" – is this, that it is next to impossible to cover by tips more than *small detached portions*, so to speak, of any large subject; and that where the man who trusts to tips almost invariably comes to grief is in regard to his knowledge of his subject *as a whole*. His is a knowledge – let alone the "cram" character which stamps it – of disunited bits and fragments, which he cannot bind together, so as to carry them all in his mind at one time.

The practised "crammer" or "tipster," who has gone over a part, in a way, perhaps fifty times before, may "get up," as he phrases it, say, the upper limb in a few days or hours. He argues that he can similarly "get up" the lower limb, the head and neck, &c. And so doubtless he can, as long as he takes these parts *separately;* but he fails as soon as he takes them *together*. Or if, by dint of wearisome repetition, he succeeded even in this feat, it could only be once in a way, at one of his best moments, and for a time too short for even the purposes of an examination. He might have a chance of passing if he could arrange to be examined just in the nick of time to suit him. But this of course is out of the question.

Says the Author, Divide: Distinguish between (1) what you *should* take in of the new matter now thrown on the educational market – that which has some good in it – and this take in well and practically, – and (2) that which will certainly not stand the test of time – the *paper anatomy* of all kinds – and this merely skim over. It is a relatively easy matter, it is averred, to learn practical anatomy practically, if only the work be taken in hand without admixture with theoretical views. And certainly nothing can well be easier than to learn theoretical anatomy, if only this also be taken alone.

Let the student learn separately the "*anatomy that can be seen and handled*," and

* Men *may* pass early by the methods of "cram;" but if they do not, they are *specially* exposed to the danger of never passing at all. They so weary of the repetition of mere words and formulæ, imposed upon them through their having but an abstract instead of a practical view of their subject, that they find it impossible, after a time, try as they may, to work at it effectually. There never was a time when so many men, – *men well-behaved, cultured, willing*, – were seen to throw up the profession through failure to pass the required tests, as is the case now-a-days.

"*that which cannot*," – the former by seeing and handing the "parts," the latter by looking at the figures and diagrams.

It is an open secret that every effort has been made of late by the Examining Bodies to reduce the present proportion of failures, which has attracted much attention.

The standards have been very distinctly lowered.

And it is specially in regard to *true practical knowledge* that this has been the case. Given the lowering, this was inevitable. The lowering of the standard of examinations is a process governed by natural laws, not a matter of caprice. It is where the men are weakest (And it has been shown that it is in practical work that men are now weakest) that less has to be required of them, if the pluck lists are to be improved.

It follows that a little practical knowledge now goes a long way, – farther than formerly, when more was expected of men in this direction, – to ensure examinational, as well as true, honest, lasting success.

One point must be added, if only in justice to the now much maligned examiners.

It must be borne in mind that the movement in the direction of widening, or adding to, the examinational requirements originated, as explained, with the *research workers* now so numerous. It affected the text-book writers before in any way reaching the examiners. It is with the text book writers that the temptation first lay (in competition, no doubt with other text-book writers) to pick up the brand-newest "conclusions" recorded in the weekly journals, and to embody these in their thus swollen new editions. It is only secondarily that, first teachers, and then examiners, had to follow suit, – in self-defence, so to speak, and in order not to appear behindhand in the so-called scientific movement of the day. Though teachers may to some extent have been influenced by somewhat the same motives as the text-book writers, examiners, certainly, have followed the movement, – the misleading movement of the day, – *to a slight extent only*, and *with reluctance*, and have continued, in the main, at least at the Colleges, to ask plain practical questions, and to reject, in the main, for inability to answer such.

Our Examiners have, in the main, done their duty. They have rejected because they could not in conscience pass the candidates.

The proper course for students must be clear under the circumstances.

The facile and vigorous pen of Mr. Mitchell Banks conveys, in striking metaphor, what the Author has endeavoured to put argumentatively:

"I have often compared the student," writes Mr. Banks, "to an invalid sitting up in a chair. At one side stands the scientific teacher shovelling down his throat all sorts of eminently condensed and highly nourishing foods – your Brand's anatomical jelly, your Valentine's biological juice, your Liebig's extract of chemistry. As the student comes to the bursting point, the teacher asks him to make one further effort—'Just one other good mouthful of peptonised physiology, my dear pupil. . . . . Then advances a gentleman (the examiner) armed with a stomach pump and a basin. 'Pray open your mouth, young gentleman, and let me put this tube down for a minute or two.' . . . . Inarticulate sounds are heard, and presently all the juices and extracts are in the examiner's basin ! . . . . Has the student had a good meal? Not a bit of it."

"You can go on adding subject to subject, and examination to examination, but by so doing you only drive the student into further and further cramming. . . . . And owing to the eternal cramming to which he is compelled to have recourse in order to master his subjects, the student loses all power of thinking or reasoning for himself. He is reduced to a mere grinding machine. . . . . You only turn out MACHINE-MADE MEN in the place of HAND-MADE ONES; and who is there who cannot see the difference in style, vigour, and durability, which the work of the hand, which shows the workman's soul, has over the work of the inanimate machine?"

The example of bold metaphor being thus set in high quarters, the Author would venture to thus commend the method of work he advises in some such a way as this: It lifts a man almost at once, he would say, to the level, or above the level, of the examinational requirements, and, at the top of the hill of, so to speak, reliable Personal Experience, places him on his 'bike,' when, legs up, he descends to the little hillock of a railway bridge, – the Examination, – which he then passes without noticing it. The "cram" method, on the other hand, compels a man to painfully pedal up every inch of the incline, and then leaves him, when exhausted, to spurt as best he can over the *then trying* examinational hillock.

Even from the mere examinational standpoint, the practical difference is not to be questioned between the mere book-knowledge mechanically poured in by the teacher, – "shovelled down," says Mr. Banks, – and the true knowledge that grows in a man, and then grows out of him in the form of applications, from the honestly nurtured living seed of *personal* observation.

There is a natural history of student-progress, – if the view may be so presented. And, in this connection, there is nothing more constant, – nothing more striking to the Author's mind, – than the easy floating up of the student, – like the boy's kite on a windy day, – to a certain and fairly definite level for each individual. From this level, however, wing it up as vigorously as he may, the student's struggles are but the counterpart of the leapings and divings of the kite. Higher he never rises in an efficient and lasting manner, unless new powers of flight be gained by entirely new methods of work.

The secret of a further rise is in the methods of work above commended, and commended in the "Advice to Students" given on page v. of Part II. of the Tablets.